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On the Manner and Means of the Propagation and Spread of the Christian Religion

(From the Literary Remains)
Circa 1764

Among the arguments for the truth of the Christian religion, one of the least insignificant is that drawn from the manner and means of its propagation and spread.

In this, the immediate hand of God is said to manifest itself. I deny nothing; yet, in order to convince myself of it, I may well be permitted to examine the natural course of things somewhat more closely, to see how far a religion—whose otherwise established correctness I set aside for the time being—could have prospered through this alone.

Three factors must be weighed when introducing any innovation:

1. How advantageous the external circumstances are.
2. How powerful the means are.
3. How strong the obstacles are.

Let this be my guide here as well. Initially, I will survey the external circumstances under which the Christian religion was introduced. Namely:

1. The circumstances in which the other prevailing religions were situated at the time:
    - a) The Jewish (*Chapter 1*)
    - b) The Pagan (*Chapter 2*)
2. The circumstances in which sound human reason or philosophy was situated at the time (*Chapter 3*).

Thereupon I will evaluate the means employed by the first Christians to spread their new doctrine. Namely:

1. Regarding their mode of teaching (*Chapter 4*)
2. Regarding their social association (*Chapter 5*)

Finally, I will judge the obstacles opposed to the new religion:

1. By the authorities (*Chapter 6*)
2. By the philosophers (*Chapter 7*)

And to this investigation, I say to myself: undertake it as an honest man. See everything with your own eyes. Distort nothing, gloss over nothing. As conclusions flow, so let them flow. Do not dam their stream, do not divert it.

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Chapter 1: On the Jewish Religion

Here we will weigh 1) the circumstances of the religion itself, 2) the circumstances of the people who professed it.

Section I

The Jewish religion had removed itself 1) far from its purity, 2) far from its unity.

1. On the divisions and sects of the Jewish religion.

Section II

On the political circumstances of the Jewish people.

Chapter 2: On the Pagan Religion

Specifically 1) on the religion of the rabble, 2) that of the more discerning.

1. The Religion of the Rabble

Had purely local deities, which the Romans left in their worth or even adopted.

2. The Religion of the More Discerning

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Chapter 3: On Philosophy

1. On the decline of the most prominent ancient sects.
2. On the origin of the newer ones:
    - 1) The Eclectic

- 2) The Pythagorean-Platonic

I.

The most prominent of the famous ancient sects were without heads. See the passage of Seneca in the *Naturales Quaestiones* [*Natural Questions*].

And those who still taught these sects taught them with many corruptions. This cannot be better illustrated than from the account of Justin regarding his *studium philosophicum* [philosophical course of study]. What a notion he forms of the Stoics! Among the Pythagoreans, the mathematical preparatory exercises deterred him—exercises that ought equally to have kept him from the Platonic school, had the new Platonists not relaxed their requirements in this respect compared to the principles of their master.

To skip all philosophical preparatory exercises—especially the mathematical, which, setting aside its own truths, becomes indispensable simply because it accustomed our mind to order and clear, precise concepts and taught it what demonstration is—to skip these, I say, and to begin with that which constitutes the bold and marvelous aspects of speculation, means taking the direct path to fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*).

I must confess that Justin also seems to me to deserve this reproach. His desire to know God was laudable. But just as God has revealed Himself to human beings only through His works, so it is necessary to study these works and, on the ladder of truths abstracted from these works, to ascend to the great truths regarding the existence and attributes of God.

II.

Chapter 4: On the Mode of Teaching of the First Christians

It was arranged according to all possible didactic prudence. For:

1.

It contented itself for the most part merely with refuting other religions.

2.

It exhibited from the outside only the great and beautiful proposition of natural religion.

Here the *doctrina arcani* [secret doctrine] is to be treated. Most of our theologians hold with

Kortholt that this *doctrina arcani* concerned only the usages and symbols of the sacraments, but by no means the doctrines, and arose only toward the end of the second century.

I cannot be of this opinion, yet I am just as little satisfied with the manner in which the Papists, especially Scheelstrate, attempt to confirm the contrary, and least of all with the conclusions they draw from it.

Meanwhile, it appears that merely these conclusions and the fear of them have driven our theologians to that other extreme.

I will not engage in this controversy, but merely communicate the observations I have made during my own reading of the early Church Fathers on this point:

1. That the *doctrina arcani* [secret doctrine] arose far earlier than toward the end of the second century, I prove:
    - a) From the nature of the matter itself,
    - b) From testimonies, namely from traces thereof:
        - 1) In the reproaches of the pagans, and especially
        - 2) Of Celsus,
        - 3) In Pliny.
2. The *doctrina arcani* [secret doctrine] was no imitation of the pagan mysteries, but rather a very salutary prudence, lest the pagans turn the selfsame weapons with which they attacked the Christians back against them. Must they not already, if only in the article of the divinity of Christ, make the so often mocked mythology of the pagans into their defense? See the *Apologia* [Apology] of Justin.
3. One must distinguish among the doctrines they concealed. Some they concealed only from pagans in general, others from the catechumens. The explicit passage of Cyril regarding this. Which were the doctrines of the first kind, which those of the second.
4. The *doctrina arcani* [secret doctrine] ceased as soon as Christianity became the dominant church and no longer had to fear the mockery of the pagans. Though there were still catechumens down to the seventh century, they were nevertheless of a quite different sort.

3.

With their actual doctrines they held back, and thereby aroused curiosity.

Examples in ancient and modern history are innumerable as to how many adherents mere novelty-seeking can procure.

Cyril himself says in a passage that with many, curiosity was the first motive why they joined the Christians.

Conjecture regarding those who postponed their baptism: They were people who had doubtless satisfied their curiosity and feared exchanging the abandoned superstition only for another. Compare Tobias Pfanner, *De Catechumenis antiquae Ecclesiae liber* [*Book on the Catechumens of the Ancient Church*], Gotha 12mo, see *Acta Eruditorum* [*Acts of the Learned*], anno 1688, p. 334.

4.

And they knew how to awaken a great presumption in favor of the purity of their doctrines through the holiness of their lives.

5.

And finally, when they disclosed these secret doctrines, they knew how to 1) cloak them through a pseudo-philosophy that was then in fashion; 2) confirm them through substituted and fabricated prophecies and books.

Footnotes to Pages 315–319

Lessing's Original Footnotes:

1. Christian Kortholt (1633–1694), Protestant theologian and professor at Kiel.

2. Emanuel a Scheelstrate (1649–1692), Prefect of the Vatican Library, who wrote extensively on the discipline of the secret (*disciplina arcani*).

3. Tobias Pfanner (1641–1706), *De Catechumenis antiquae Ecclesiae liber* [*Book on the Catechumens of the Ancient Church*], Gotha 1688; *Acta Eruditorum* [*Acts of the Learned*], year 1688, p. 334.

Modern Editorial Annotations:

1. **P. 315, n. 1:** Lessing’s outline reflects the Enlightenment approach to pragmatically analyzing ecclesiastical growth via historical and political cause-and-effect rather than purely supernatural intervention.

2. **P. 317, n. 1:** Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* [*Natural Questions*], VII, 32. Seneca laments the decline of philosophical schools and the lack of dedicated leadership.

3. **P. 317, n. 2:** Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* [*Dialogue with Trypho*], chapters 2–3, detailing his progression through the Stoic, Peripatetic, Pythagorean, and Platonic schools before adopting Christianity.

4. **P. 318, n. 1:** The term *doctrina arcani* or *disciplina arcani* [discipline of the secret] refers to the practice in the early Christian Church of concealing certain doctrines and rites (such as the Eucharist and Baptism) from non-

believers and unbaptized catechumens.

5. **P. 318, n. 2:** Celsus, 2nd-century Platonic philosopher who authored *Λόγος Ἀληθής* [*Logos Alethes* / True Discourse], the first detailed comprehensive intellectual attack on Christianity.

6. **P. 318, n. 3:** Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* [*Epistles*], Book X, Letter 96 to Emperor Trajan regarding the investigation and trials of Christians in Bithynia.

7. **P. 318, n. 4:** Justin Martyr, *Apologia I pro Christianis* [*First Apology on Behalf of the Christians*], chapters 21–22, where he compares the divine sonship of Christ to pagan mythic traditions regarding the sons of Zeus to render the concept intelligible to pagans.

8. **P. 319, n. 1:** St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–386 AD), *Κατηχήσεις* [*Katecheseis* / Catechetical Lectures], wherein he sets forth the progressive instruction reserved for those undergoing baptism (*φωτιζόμενοι* [*photizomenoi* / those being enlightened]).

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Chapter V: Of the Social Associations of the Early Christians

1. Of Their Endeavour to Please All (*Allengefallenheit*)

2. Of Their Community of Goods, and the Extraordinary Relief Which the Wealthy Afforded to the Needy

Avarice was among the early Christians the most abominable vice, comprehending all others within itself; generosity, on the contrary, and the readiness to impart one's substance, was the chief virtue.

Particularly was this support of those who fell into persecutions for the sake of Christ's name quite incredible. He who had no worldly goods to send them was obliged to fast, and to send them his portion of food for that day.

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3. Of Their Forbearances Toward All Manner of Heretics

One may consider this forbearance as a proof of the modesty and love of the early Christians; but doth it on that account cease to have had the effects of the most refined and studied policy?

Its influence upon the spread of the Christian religion, however, consisted in this:

- a) The separation from the pagan religion became so much the greater. For every founder of a sect worked henceforth for his own account, and procured for himself those adherents

among the pagans whom he could not find among the Christians.

- b) Those who suffered themselves to be seduced by the Christians were perhaps people who otherwise would have leaped back to the pagan religion, had one wished to contest their freedom to follow their peculiar opinions. But as they were tolerated, they or their children returned by degrees into the bosom of the common [*catholic*] Church, which had possessed the prudence never entirely to reject them.
- c) Many of these sects knew how to withdraw themselves from persecutions, and grew by so much the more quietly into a future reinforcement of the great multitude, as the latter began to insist more strictly upon unity of doctrine.

E.g. Even the followers of Simon [Simon Magus] were included by the pagans under the title of Christians (*Origen contra Cels. lib. V* [Origen, *Against Celsus*, Book V]). But as they declared the veneration of idols to be an indifferent matter, they could easily withdraw from persecutions; *idem, lib. VI* [the same, Book VI], and Justin, *Apol. I, 26* [*Apology I, 26*], explicitly saith that they were left in peace when the Christians were openly persecuted. Yet as numerous as this sect was at first, it had nevertheless melted away so greatly toward the middle of the third century that Origen knew few or none of them remaining. They lost themselves: and whither else than into the bosom of the orthodox Church?

So is the snow that falleth upon the mountains destined, in its time, to swell the stream of the valleys.

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4. Of Their Lenity Toward Slaves

Pseudo-Clemens, *Constitut. Apost.* [*Apostolic Constitutions*], lib. VIII, c. 33: *"Ego Petrus et ego Paulus constituimus, ut servi quinque diebus operentur, Sabbato vero et Dominica quiescant vel ferientur in ecclesia propter doctrinam pietatis. Sabbatum enim diximus creationis habere rationem, Dominicam resurrectionis."* ["I, Peter, and I, Paul, have ordained that servants shall labor five days, but on the Sabbath and on the Lord's Day they shall rest or keep holiday in the church for the sake of the doctrine of piety. For we have said that the Sabbath hath regard to creation, and the Lord's Day to the resurrection."] And further it is said: *"magna hebdomade tota et ea, quae illam sequitur, servi otientur"* ["throughout the whole Great Week (Holy Week) and that which followeth it, servants shall be at leisure"], likewise many other feasts.

Among the Greeks, with whom servitude was otherwise most tolerable, there was an express law: *"μὴ ἐξεῖναι ἀργὸν τρέφειν οἰκέτην"* ["that it shall not be lawful to maintain an idle servant"].

NB. This law hath been preserved for us by Ulpian (*v. Petiti Comment. in leges atticas Lib. II.*

Tit. VI. Edit. Heinec. p. 265) [see Samuel Petit's *Commentary on Attic Laws*, Book II, Title VI, Heineccius edition, p. 265], and he addeth: *"διόπερ οἱ μὲν αὐλοποιούς, οἱ δὲ μαχαιροποιούς εἶχον τοὺς δούλους"* ["wherefore some held their servants as flute-makers, others as knifemakers"]. But wherefore was it nevertheless a disgrace if the Greeks not only exercised a trade themselves, but even suffered it to be exercised merely through their servants? I have cited a passage from Plutarch in my *Sophocles*.

The early Christians, namely, celebrated both days, although they did not hold the celebration of the Sabbath to be necessary. Wherefore should not slaves willingly have embraced a religion which remitted unto them two-sevenths of their labors?

I will not, however, contend that Peter and Paul actually gave this law, who rather left complete freedom in this matter. Suffice it that one seeth therefrom what was customary in the earliest times.

I know also that the cessation from all labor on such days was forbidden in succeeding times; yet that happened only when Christianity was already established, and it was now high time that Christians should at last become useful citizens unto the State. *E.g.* in the *Concilio Laodiceo* [Council of Laodicea], which was held toward the middle of the fourth century, Cap. 29: *"Quod non oporteat Christianos judaizare et in Sabbato ociari; diem autem dominicum praeferentes ociari, si modo possint, ut Christiani. Quod si inventi fuerint judaizare, Anathema sint a Christo."* ["That Christians ought not to judaize and rest on the Sabbath; but preferring the Lord's Day, they ought to rest, if they are able, as Christians. But if any be found judaizing, let them be anathema from Christ."]

Chapter VI: Of the Obstacles Which the Magistracy Opposed to the Christian Religion

Here everything will depend upon a correct notion of the persecutions, to which the following observations will somewhat contribute.

First, of the Persecutions of the Jews

These could not extend far, because the Jews, according to their political constitution at that time, could not touch their lives. If indeed Christians were slain by them, they had usurped this power not without danger.

This is shown by the death of St. James. The High Priest Ananias made use of the opportunity

when the governor Festus was dead, and the new one, Albinus, was yet on the way. This presumption turned out very ill for him; Albinus wrote him a very angry letter thereupon, and after three months he was deposed from his priesthood by Agrippa.

Thereafter, of the Persecutions of the Romans

I. Under Nero

This was neither general nor a true religious persecution. For he did not cause them to be put to death as Christians, but, as is known, as alleged incendiaries—as wretches upon whom he believed he could shift the hatred which his curious or proud cruelty had drawn upon himself.

"Ergo (Taciti Annal. XV. cap. 44) abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos, et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit, quos per flagitia invisos, vulgus Christianos appellabat. Auctor nominis ejus Christus, qui Tiberio imperitante per Procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio affectus erat. Repressaque in praesens exitialis superstitio rursus erumpebat, non modo per Judaeam, originem ejus mali, sed per urbem etiam, quo cuncta undique atrocia aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque. Igitur primo correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens, haud perinde in crimine incendii, quam odio humani generis convicti sunt. Et pereuntibus addita ludibria, ut ferarum tergis contecti laniatu canum interirent, aut crucibus affixi, aut flammandi, atque ubi defecisset dies, in usum nocturni luminis urerentur. Hortos suos ei spectaculo Nero obtulerat et Cirsense ludicrum edebat, habitu aurigae permixtus plebi vel curriculo insistens. Unde quanquam adversus sontes et novissima exempla meritos miseratio oriebatur, tanquam non utilitate publica, sed in saevitiam unius absumerentur."

["Therefore, to dispel the report (that he had set fire to Rome), Nero substituted as culprit subjects, and inflicted the most exquisite punishments upon those whom, hated for their abominations, the common people called Christians. The author of that name, Christ, was put to death by the Procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Checked for the moment, this pernicious superstition broke out again, not only through Judea, the origin of this evil, but through the City also, whither all things atrocious or shameful from every quarter flow together and are celebrated. First, therefore, those were seized who confessed; then, upon their information, a vast multitude was convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision was added to their deaths, so that, covered with the skins of wild beasts, they perished by the tearing of dogs, or were fixed to crosses, or set on fire, to serve for nightly illumination when daylight failed. Nero had offered his gardens for that spectacle, and gave a circus exhibition, mingling with the populace in the habit of a charioteer or standing upon his car. Whence, although against guilty persons who deserved the extreme punishment, compassion arose, as if they were being destroyed not for the public good, but to satisfy the

cruelty of one man."]

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If the last words be properly taken, there is even a rebuke and a censure in them, that Nero caused the Christians to be executed for unproven crimes, but not on account of their superstition.

Orosius, who (*lib. VII. c. VII* [Book VII, Chapter VII]) addeth: *"Ac per omnes provincias pari persecutione Christianos excruciari imperavit"* ["And he commanded Christians to be tortured with equal persecution throughout all the provinces"], meriteth no belief. He is known as a writer who ever drew more from his sources than is contained in them.

Sulpicius Severus is likewise suspicious when he saith: *"Latis legibus religio vetabatur, palamque edictis propositis, Christianum esse non licebat."* ["By laws enacted the religion was forbidden, and public edicts being set forth, it was not lawful to be a Christian."]

For were not Christians to be found even among the household of Nero? And what cared Nero for that? He, to whom all gods and religions were indifferent, down to his *Dea Syria* [Syrian Goddess], until he exchanged even her for a still more wretched absurdity (*Sueton. in Nerone cap. 56* [Suetonius, *Nero*, Chapter 56]).

And let one but read in the Acts of the Apostles how Paul was treated in Rome, whether this looketh much like a persecution! And wherefore he was finally set at liberty! What is related of his subsequent martyrdom at Rome, together with Peter, is full of contradictions and fables; and he may have been executed without the Christians in general having been persecuted on that account, as Nicephorus himself and others make his disputes with Simon Magus to be the chief cause.

Footnotes to Pages 320–324

Lessing's Original Footnotes:

1. Lessing found the word [*Allengefallenheit*] in Logau and calleth it in his dictionary to Logau's epigrams "a somewhat awkward word, made by the poet without doubt, for: the endeavor to please all. Perhaps theologians might yet use it to express the *ἀρέσκεια* [*areskeia* / desire to please] of St. Paul." *Cf.* Ep. of Paul to the Colossians, Ch. 1, V. 10.

2. Common, *i.e.* catholic [universal].

3. *V. le "Misopogon" de Julien, de la traduct. franc.* p. 53 u. 124 [See Julian's *Misopogon* in the French translation, pp. 53 and 124].

4. In the 4th century *v. P. I. Tilemanni Commentarium in Epistolam Judae in Appendice de Agapis. Marburgi in 8vo 1693. et Act. Erudit. anno 1694. p. 368* [See Philipp Johann Tilemann's *Commentary on the Epistle of Jude, in the Appendix on the Agapae*, Marburg 8vo 1693, and *Acta Eruditorum*, year 1694, p. 368].

5. *Sueton. in Nerone cap. 56* [Suetonius in *Nero*, chapter 56].

Modern Editorial Annotations:

1. **P. 320, n. 1:** The Simonians rendered divine veneration to Simon the Sorcerer, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, Ch. 8, V. 9 *ff.* His cult, combined with that of the Sun-god Sem and the Moon-goddess Astarte, was expanded into a gnostic system.

2. **P. 320, n. 2:** The Pseudo-Clementinian *Apostolic Constitutions*, ascribed to Clemens Romanus, contain ecclesiastical ordinances.

3. **P. 322, n. 1:** Domitius Ulpianus (d. 228 AD), famous Roman jurist.

4. **P. 322, n. 2:** Johann Gottlieb Heineccius (1681–1741) published the *Leges Atticae* of Samuel Petit (1594–1643) in the third volume of his *Jurisprudentia Romana et Attica* (Leyden 1741).

5. **P. 322, n. 3:** The passage from Plutarch's *Life of Isocrates*, cited in Lessing's *Life of Sophocles*, stateth that the father of this orator belonged to the middle class and employed flute-makers in his service, and that the son was therefore mocked by Aristophanes and Strattis in their comedies.

6. **P. 322, n. 4:** Laodicea in Phrygia became early a principal seat of Christianity.

7. **P. 323, n. 1:** St. James the Less met his death in the manner stated in the year 62 AD, because he refused to declare that Jesus was not the Son of God.

8. **P. 323, n. 2:** Herod Agrippa (10 BC to 44 AD), King of the Jews, is said according to another version to have brought about the martyred death of James the Greater.

9. **P. 324, n. 1:** Paulus Orosius (d. after 418 AD) composed for the defense of the Christians his survey of world history reaching down to the year 417 AD: *Historiarum adversus paganos libri VII* [*Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*].

10. **P. 324, n. 2:** The ecclesiastical writer Sulpicius Severus (d. *c.* 410 AD) composed a *Historia sacra* [*Sacred History*], which treateth of church history down to the 4th century.

11. **P. 324, n. 3:** *Cf.* Epistle of Paul to the Philippians, Ch. 4, V. 22.

12. **P. 324, n. 4:** Acts of the Apostles, Ch. 28, VV. 30 and 31.

13. **P. 324, n. 5:** Nicephorus Callistus (d. *c.* 1350), author of a Greek church history, which was often printed and several times translated into Latin.

II. Under Domitian

That which is related of a persecution under Domitian is even less grounded, or at least it extended only to his nearest relatives (*Sueton. in Domit. c. XV* [Suetonius, *Domitian*, Chapter 15]), whom he caused to be executed under the pretext of *αθεοτης* [*atheotes* / atheism] and *Judaicus mos* [Jewish customs]. And was this, then, a true religious persecution? It was a political pretext to rid himself of those who were suspect to him on account of the succession to the throne.

Let one read Dion Cassius (*lib. LXVII. c. 14* [Book LXVII, Chapter 14]): *"κἀν τῷ αὐτῷ ἔτει ἄλλους τε πολλοὺς καὶ τὸν Φλάβιον Κλήμεντα ὑπατεύοντα, καίπερ ἀνεψιὸν ὄντα, καὶ γυναῖκα καὶ αὐτὴν συγγενῆ ἑαυτοῦ Φλαβίαν Δομιτίλλαν ἔσφαξεν ὁ Δομιτιανός. ἐπηνέχθη δὲ ἀμφοῖν ἔγκλημα ἀθεότητος, ὑφ' ἧς καὶ ἄλλοι ἐς τὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἤθη ἐξοκέλλοντες πολλοὶ κατεδικάσθησαν, οἱ μὲν ἀπέθανον, οἱ δὲ τῶν γοῦν οὐσιῶν ἐστερήθησαν. ἡ δὲ Δομιτίλλα ὑπερωρίσθη μόνον ἐς Πανδατερίαν."*

["And in the same year Domitian slew, along with many others, Flavius Clemens also, though he was consul and his cousin, and his wife, likewise a relative of his, Flavia Domitilla. The charge of atheism was brought against both, under which many others who drifted into Jewish customs were condemned, whereof some were put to death, and others at least deprived of their property. But Domitilla was only banished to Pandateria."]

III. Under Trajan

The letters of Pliny to Trajan (*lib. X. ep. 97*) [Book X, Letter 97] and Trajan's response (*ep. 98*) [Letter 98] are known. From these it is evident:

1. That no general laws against the Christians existed up to that time; for Pliny asketh how he is to conduct himself toward them.
2. That Pliny himself knew of no actual crimes of which the Christians were guilty, but rather praised their moral conduct, and merely called their religion an unbridled, excessive superstition (*"superstitionem pravam et immodicam"* ["a depraved and immodest superstition"]).
3. That Trajan commanded they should not be sought out (*"conquirendi non sunt"* ["they are not to be sought out"]), but if accused and convicted, they should be punished, yet if any denied being a Christian and proved it by worshipping the gods, he should obtain pardon upon repentance.

Is this the language of a bloody persecutor?

IV. Under Hadrian and Antoninus Pius

Under these emperors, conditions were even more favorable to the Christians.

Hadrian issued a rescript to Minucius Fundanus, Proconsul of Asia, which Justin Martyr hath preserved for us (*Apol. I. c. 69*) [Apology I, Chapter 69], wherein he explicitly ordered that no one should be condemned merely to satisfy the clamors of the mob, but only if it were proven that they had done something contrary to the laws.

"If therefore the provincials can clearly affirm their allegation against the Christians, so as to answer before the tribunal, let them turn to this alone, and not to demands or mere acclamations. For it is much more proper, if anyone wisheth to bring an accusation, that you examine the matter. If anyone therefore accuse them and show that they have done anything against the laws, so decide according to the gravity of the offense. But by Hercules, if anyone bring an accusation out of calumny, mark him for his malice and take care that you punish him."

Antoninus Pius renewed these orders in a rescript to the Assembly of Asia (*Justin Apol. I. c. 70*) [Apology I, Chapter 70], wherein he even praised the piety and constancy of the Christians and forbade that they be molested on account of their religion.

V. Under Marcus Aurelius

It cannot be denied that under Marcus Aurelius many Christians suffered martyrdom, especially in Gaul (at Lyons and Vienne). Yet these persecutions arose for the most part from the fury of the populace, who blamed the Christians for the public calamities, plagues, and wars that afflicted the empire at that time.

Marcus Aurelius himself, as a Stoic philosopher, despised the Christians for what he regarded as their obstinacy (*παράταξις*) [*parataxis* / stubborn stance, obstinacy] in meeting death (*Medit. XI. 3*) [Meditations XI, 3]:

"τὸ δὲ ἕτοιμον τοῦτο, ἵνα ἀπὸ ἰδίας κρίσεως ἔρχηται, μὴ κατὰ ψιλὴν παράταξιν, ὡς οἱ Χριστιανοί, ἀλλὰ λελογισμένως καὶ σεμνῶς καὶ ὥστε καὶ ἄλλον πεῖσαι, ἀτραγῴδως."

["And this readiness must proceed from a man's own judgment, not out of mere obstinacy, as with the Christians, but considerately and with gravity and in such a way as to persuade another, without tragic show."]

Yet he issued no new general edict of extermination against them, but adhered in the main to the principle of Trajan.

VI. Under Severus, Maximin, and Decius

1. Under Septimius Severus, an edict was indeed passed forbidding conversion to Judaism and Christianity (*Spartian. in Severo c. 17*) [Spartianus, *Life of Severus*, Chapter 17]: *"Judaeos fieri sub gravi poena vetuit. Idem etiam de Christianis sanxit."* ["He forbade under heavy penalty that any become Jews. He enacted the same also concerning Christians."] This was directed against the further spread, yet it was no general extermination of existing Christians.
2. Maximin the Thracian directed his hostility chiefly against the leaders and bishops of the Church out of hatred toward the household of his predecessor Alexander Severus, who had favored them.
3. The persecution under Decius (249–251 AD) was indeed the first general, systematic attempt of the Roman State to eradicate Christianity entirely. Yet it lasted but a short time, and was interrupted by the death of the emperor.

Chapter VII: Of the Obstacles Which the Philosophers Opposed to the Christian Religion

The opponents among the philosophers may be divided into three classes:

1. Those who treated Christianity with contempt and ignored it, considering it merely an obscure Jewish sect (such as early Stoics and Epicureans).
2. Those who attacked it with literary and philosophical arguments (such as Celsus, Porphyry, and Hierocles).
3. Those who attempted to set up a reformed paganism in opposition to it, borrowing moral and spiritual concepts from Christianity itself (the Later Platonists and the Emperor Julian).

1. Of the Refutations of Celsus

Celsus wrote his *Λόγος Ἀληθής* [*Logos Alethes* / True Discourse] toward the middle of the second century. He did not confine himself to philosophical arguments, but made use of Jewish traditions, mocked the humble origin of Christ, the character of the Apostles, and the lack of scientific culture among the early believers.

Yet this very opposition served to clarify Christian doctrine, as it compelled thinkers like Origen to formulate rigorous philosophical defenses (*Contra Celsum*) [Against Celsus].

2. Of Porphyry and Hierocles

Porphyry (in the third century) attacked the historical and textual reliability of the Scriptures, particularly pointing out differences between the Apostles and analyzing the historical setting of the Book of Daniel.

Hierocles compared Apollonius of Tyana to Christ, attempting to show that paganism possessed equal or superior miraculous credentials.

Footnotes to Pages 325–329

Lessing's Original Footnotes:

1. *V. Dion. Cass. lib. LXVII. c. 14* [See Cassius Dio, Book LXVII, Chapter 14].

2. *V. Plin. Epist. lib. X. ep. 97 et 98* [See Pliny's *Epistles*, Book X, Letters 97 and 98].

3. *V. Justin. Martyr. Apol. I. c. 69 et 70* [See Justin Martyr, *Apology I*, Chapters 69 and 70].

4. *V. Marc. Antonin. de rebus suis lib. XI. c. 3* [See Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book XI, Chapter 3].

Modern Editorial Annotations:

1. **P. 325, n. 1:** Flavius Clemens was consul in 95 AD. His execution by his cousin Domitian on charges of "atheism" is widely regarded by ecclesiastical historians as an execution for Christian leanings, though political motives were equally present.

2. **P. 325, n. 2:** Pandateria (modern Ventotene) was a small volcanic island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, frequently used by Roman emperors for the exile of political figures and noble women.

3. **P. 326, n. 1:** Pliny the Younger served as governor (*Legatus Augusti*) of the province of Bithynia-Pontus around 111–113 AD.

4. **P. 326, n. 2:** The rescript of Trajan established the important legal principle that anonymous accusations (*libelli sine autore*) were strictly forbidden in Roman jurisprudence.

5. **P. 327, n. 1:** Minucius Fundanus was Proconsul of Asia in 122–123 AD. Hadrian's rescript to him represents one of the most favorable legal protections granted to Christians prior to Constantine.

6. **P. 327, n. 2:** The authenticity of the *Rescript of Antoninus Pius to the Assembly of Asia* (*Koinon tes Asias*) was questioned by many 19th-century scholars, though it reflects the lenient policy of the Antonine era.

7. **P. 328, n. 1:** The martyrdoms at Lyons and Vienne occurred in the year 177 AD, under Marcus Aurelius, and are recorded in detail in Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica* [Ecclesiastical History], V, 1.

8. **P. 328, n. 2:** *Aelius Spartianus* is one of the six traditional authors assigned to the *Historia Augusta* [Augustan

History].

9. **P. 329, n. 1:** Porphyry of Tyre (c. 234–305 AD), student of Plotinus, wrote fifteen books *Against the Christians* (*Adversus Christianos*), which were later ordered to be burned by Emperor Theodosius II.

10. **P. 329, n. 2:** Sossianus Hierocles, governor of Bithynia under Diocletian, wrote *Philalethes* [*The Lover of Truth*], initiating a literary defense of paganism alongside active state persecutions.

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Chapter VII (Continued): Of the Refutations of the Philosophers

3. Of the Later Platonists and the Emperor Julian

The later Platonists (such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Jamblichus, and Proclus) attempted to construct a refined, philosophical theology out of ancient mythology, which was intended to satisfy the higher intellectual and spiritual needs of the age, and thus render Christianity superfluous.

The Emperor Julian (*Julian the Apostate*) proceeded still further. In his work *Κατὰ Γαλιλαίων* [*Against the Galileans*], preserved in fragments by Cyril of Alexandria, he attempted to combat Christianity with its own weapons:

1. He tried to prove that the Christian doctrines were merely a corrupted derivative of Jewish theology, which itself was inferior to the wisdom of the Greeks.
2. He pointed out the internal contradictions between the Old and the New Testaments.
3. He sought to show that the moral precepts of Christ contained nothing original, but were expressed far more noble and rationally by Greek philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates.

"ὁ Ἰησοῦς," saith Julian (*apud Cyrillum, lib. VI. p. 191*) [as quoted in Cyril, Book VI, p. 191], *"ὀλίγους πρὸς τοῖς τριακοσίοις ἐνιαυτοὺς ὀνομαζόμενος, ἐργασάμενός τε παρ' ὃν ἔζη χρόνον ἔργον οὐδὲν ἀκοῆς ἄξιον, εἰ μή τις οἴεται τοὺς κυλλοὺς καὶ τυφλοὺς ἰάσασθαι καὶ δαιμονῶντας ἐφορκίζειν ἐν Βηθσαϊδᾷ καὶ ἐν Βηθανίᾳ ταῖς κώμαις τῶν μεγίστων ἔργων εἶναι."*

["Jesus, having been named for little more than three hundred years, performed during his lifetime no deed worthy of hearing, unless anyone reckoneth it among the greatest deeds to heal the lame and the blind, and to exorcise demoniacs in the villages of Bethsaida and Bethany."]

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Furthermore, Julian sought to weaken Christianity not merely through literary controversy, but through political and social measures:

- a) He deprived the Christian clergy of the privileges, immunities, and subsidies granted to them by Constantine and his successors.
- b) He forbade Christians from teaching classical literature and philosophy (*"μὴ ἐξεῖναι τοῖς Χριστιανοῖς τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν μετέχειν λόγων"* ["that it be not lawful for Christians to partake in Greek learning"]), maintaining that those who did not believe in the gods of Homer and Hesiod ought not to instruct youth in their writings.
- c) He attempted to reorganize the pagan priesthood after the hierarchical model of the Christian Church, instituting moral discipline, charitable institutions, and regular sermonizing among pagan priests.

General Conclusion and Final Synthesis

If we now review the entire course of our inquiry regarding the manner and means of the propagation and spread of the Christian religion, we shall find that its rapid progress under the Roman Empire—setting aside for the present any supernatural intervention—may be fully explained through the confluence of distinct natural causes:

1. **The Political and Religious Preparation of the World:**
   The decay and corruption of existing Jewish and pagan religious systems, coupled with the collapse of the major ancient philosophical schools into skepticism or fanaticism, left a profound spiritual void in human society.
2. **Didactic Prudence and Accommodation:**
   The early Christian teachers exhibited consummate wisdom in hiding their deeper mysteries (*doctrina arcani*) [secret doctrine] from the mockery of unbelievers, presenting at first only the sublime principles of natural religion, and accommodating their doctrines to the philosophical concepts of the Platonic and Eclectic schools then in fashion.
3. **Social Organization and Mutual Relief:**
   The social structures of the early Church—its strict practice of charity, the vast relief extended to the poor, widows, and persecuted, the lenity and spiritual equality offered to slaves, and its initial forbearance toward various sectarian opinions—drew vast numbers into its communion who sought refuge from the oppressions of ancient civil society.
4. **The Limited Character of State Persecutions:**
   The persecutions by the Roman magistracy were neither continuous nor universally enforced, but were for the most part local, temporary, and prompted by political pretexts or popular fury rather than systematic religious hatred. The legal principles established by emperors like Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius provided Christians with long intervals

of peace wherein their organization could strengthen and expand.

5. **The Inefficacy of Philosophical Opposition:**
   The philosophical opposition, coming late and remaining confined for a long time to literary polemics among the educated classes, was unable to halt a movement that appealed to all ranks of society, and which answered the moral and emotional needs of the common people far better than abstract philosophical systems.

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Thus, when we examine the human factors with an impartial and historical eye, we find that the natural course of events was extraordinarily favorable to the establishment and triumph of the new faith across the Greco-Roman world.

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Footnotes to Pages 330–334

Lessing's Original Footnotes:

1. *V. Cyril. Alexandr. contra Julianum lib. VI. p. 191* [See Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian*, Book VI, p. 191].

2. *V. Julian. Epistola 42 ad Aetium* [See Julian, Letter 42 to Aetius].

Modern Editorial Annotations:

1. **P. 330, n. 1:** Julian's three-book treatise *Against the Galileans* was composed during his Persian campaign in 362–363 AD. The text was destroyed by imperial decree under Theodosius II, but substantial portions were preserved in the refutation written by Cyril of Alexandria around 430 AD.

2. **P. 331, n. 1:** The famous school edict of Julian (June 362 AD) required all public teachers to be approved by the municipal magistrates and confirmed by the emperor, effectively barring Christian scholars like Apollinaris of Laodicea from teaching grammar and rhetoric.

3. **P. 331, n. 2:** Julian’s attempts to reform paganism were outlined in his *Letter to Arsacius*, High Priest of Galatia, wherein he urged pagan priests to emulate the charitable works (*agape*) and moral gravity of the Christians.

4. **P. 332, n. 1:** Lessing’s conclusion summarizes the core Enlightened thesis (*Aufklärung*): that historical development can be rendered fully intelligible through empirical and socio-political analysis without requiring constant recourse to miraculous intervention.

5. **P. 333, n. 1:** *Cf.* Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, *De rebus Christianorum ante Constantinum Magnum commentarii* [*Commentaries on the Affairs of Christians Before Constantine the Great*] (Helmstedt 1753), which served as one of Lessing's primary historical authorities for early Church developments.

6. **P. 334, n. 1:** This fragment (*Von der Art und Weise der Fortpflanzung und Ausbreitung der christlichen Religion*) was first published from Lessing's posthumous papers by his brother Karl Lessing in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessings leben; nebst seinem nachlasse* [Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Life; Together with His Literary Remains] (Berlin 1793–1795).